Back to the future with Kreutzer

George Kentros, Rei Nakamura
george.kentros@kmh.se
Royal College of Music, Stockholm, Sweden

Abstract

Vinyl records have long been a part of the decontextualization of musical content, from Cage’s "Williams Mix" through DJ culture to sampling, and have long been a staple of the Danish sound art duo "Vinyl-terror- & -horror"’s live performances and installations. There is also a history of broken vinyl records being repurposed as sounding objects from Milan Knizak on, but translating these sounds back the forum of live performance through their transcription (which Knizak thought was impossible) offers another prism through which to interpret these sounds. Here, two musicians explore possibilities created when appropriating the results of another appropriation: namely, taking a filmed destruction and reassembly of vinyl records containing a single piece and recasting it into its "original" form as a piece of live chamber music. This is accomplished by transcribing the sonic material resulting from Vinyl-terror- & -horror’s destructive treatments of the movements of Beethoven’s Kreutzer Sonata and replacing the sound by performing it live in synch with the (now silent) filmed documentation of the destructive/creative process. The presentation outlines the justifications for treating historical works of music in this way, tracing ontological discourses from Lydia Goehr to Paolo de Assis along with Kenneth Goldsmith’s contextualization of earlier appropriation techniques from the spheres of art and music, and describes the practical and artistic difficulties encountered by the musicians during the process of transcription, rehearsal and performance by showing examples of the different treatments and the sounding results of their transcriptions.

KEYWORDS: art music, performance, interpretation
Exploratory proposal

The problematization of the work concept has been growing within the field of art music at least since the 1990s, when researchers such as Lydia Goehr began questioning the ontology of a musical work, positing e.g. that before 1800 music was seen more as a process than as a "work" that exists in one true form (Goehr, 2007). Jacques Attali also traces the history of the work concept to around 1800 and finds as its driving force the advent of capitalist thinking, supplying musical life with a defined product that could be bought and sold (Attali, 1985): first as a score, and then as a recording. More recently, researchers such as Pablo de Assis have propagated for a Deleuzean vision of the musical work (called the "work" by de Assis) as a "topological space of possibilities" (De Assis, 2018), containing almost infinite interpretive possibilities. These discourses have arisen from a pressing need among music practitioners to expand the performance of historical art music into something other than a static reproduction of previously experienced recordings. As part of a three-year research project at KMH in Stockholm funded by the Swedish Research Council developing new strategies for treating and reinterpreting historical music and called "Back to the future," the violinist George Kentros and pianist Rei Nakamura have turned to a sound art duo with a long history of treating vinyl recordings, Vinyl-terror & -horror (VTaH, see artist link). While VTaH's works are usually turned into installations or live LP shows performed by themselves, we have worked together to transform their shattered vinyls back into a notated musical work that can be performed live by musicians. Trained as sculptors, VTaH draws on forms and techniques taken from the art world as well as their own musical processes to create their works. To date, their practice has involved the juxtapositions of different genres and styles, but the idea of using these techniques on a single work brings with it a different set of limitations and possibilities. Does the distorted result remain connected to the foundational work or is it something else? The reimagining we have created involves a film behind the musicians showing a live manipulation of vinyl records seen from above and their resultant sounds. These sounds have been transcribed into notes for the original setting of violin and piano and performed in sync with a silent version of the film. The film itself can be seen as a sort of process sculpture evoking e.g Roman Signer, expanding the field of what sculpture can be while also balancing on the edge of DJ culture, and allows the audience to witness the processes involved in the creation of the sounding results while they are being performed live. The records contain one movement
each of Beethoven’s Kreutzer Sonata that have been manipulated in various ways (see fig. 1), and these foundational materials symbolize the ”static reproduction” of musical cliches referred to above. The visible hand of the DJ guiding the phonograph needle reinforces the feeling of the musicians being steered by a higher power, like puppets, as they in fact are in so many institutional classical music performances. Here, however, instead of unreflected playing styles being utilized in order to reinforce a questionable tradition, they and their decontextualization are instead used towards an artistic end that highlights the assumptions underpinning a standard interpretation. So in this case, instead of using contemporary and/or personal interpretive techniques to enrich the musical experience, the musician is forced to attempt to sound as much like a previous recording as possible in order for the recontextualization to be effective. This is therefore an example of a collaborative reinterpretation in which the point is to create a recontextualization through a visible and audible decontextualization of the material, allowing us to reflect on what is normally taken for granted in notated Western art music practice. The exploratory presentation will consist of a brief description of the research project’s context followed by the processes and difficulties involved in creating, transcribing, and performing the work, as well as filmed materials and recordings showing the similarities and differences between the filmed ”score” and the performative ”work.”

Figure 1: Excerpt from ”Kreutzer variations movement 1” as vinyl treatment.
References


Cutler, Chris (2020). *Not as we choose*. ReR Megacorp


Artists mentioned in the text:

Knizak, Milan:

Since music that results from playing ruined gramophone records cannot be transcribed to notes, the records themselves may be considered as notations at the same time. (Knizak, https://www.whathifi.com/features/a-history-of-the-strangest-vinyl-records-ever-made)

Signer, Roman: https://www.hauserwirth.com/artists/2805-roman-signer/